



Fourth Sunday of Easter

7 May 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Alexander Millar, Minister of Stirling: St Columba's, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday of Easter.

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Introduction

In John's Gospel there are seven occasions when Jesus refers to himself in the 'I am.....' sayings. This week he announces 'I am the gate for the sheep', and the Revised Common Lectionary follows this up next week with another: 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John 14: 1-14).

Acts 2: 42-47

Luke, following his description of Peter's Pentecostal address, presents in summary the life of the early Church and the characteristic features of the early fellowship. 'Many wonders and miraculous signs' were witnessed, offering a validation of the message of salvation and authenticating the authority vested in the apostles. The association of the apostles with Jesus over the period of his earthly ministry, as witnesses of his resurrection, and as the early custodians of the Gospel message highlight their central importance in the formation of the Jerusalem fellowship in the days following the 'birth-day' of the Church. Note that the first converts 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer', hinting at an 'apostolic succession', with a prominence here on continuity between the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the reliable and trustworthy representation of these same events post-Resurrection in the words and actions of the apostles.

The dynamic character of the life of the early church is illustrated by the generosity and plenty of its common life, which attracted favourable attention and carried a winsome appeal, reflected in the observation in the final verse: 'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'

Psalm 23

This familiar Psalm describes God as a faithful shepherd, providing for the needs of his flock and protecting them against harm. The shepherd is diligent in providing the best resources to hand, as in 'green pastures' and 'quiet waters', and in providing a restful environment free from fear of danger, the irritation of flies or parasites, disturbance within the flock, and too little food or sustenance. The shepherd's care is restorative and he can be relied upon as a caring and trusted



guide with the best interests of the sheep at heart, and perennially present, even 'through the valley of the shadow of death'. Whether the rod and the staff referred to in verse 4 is a single instrument or several is immaterial; the picture is of a sturdy object that could be used to ward off predators and maintain the discipline of the flock by keeping them together, as and when required.

In verse 5 onwards the imagery shifts to the Lord as the host at the table. He promises no harm shall come to his guests, no matter who else is in attendance, and generously supplying the provision that is presently required, as suggested by the anointing of the head with oil and the bounty of the cup overflowing. Moreover, there is the promise too of a future blessing, as in verse 6, which presents the notion of a continuing and long term association that can be relied upon to deliver benefit and benediction in time to come, the hospitality of the moment a foretaste of more to follow.

1 Peter 2: 19-25

These verses would have had an immediacy, given that many of the early converts were servants and slaves. In the ancient world neither had rights and entitlements and were regarded as the property of their masters, and hence had no guarantee of either fair treatment or justice. Christianity, though, presented a challenge to the ordering of society, for the Gospel message is that intrinsically all have worth and value in the eyes of God, the least as well as the greatest. Yet there is no suggestion here of overthrowing the institution of slavery, and as in the case of Paul urging Onesimus to return to Philemon and for his status as a slave to remain unaltered, the prevailing social order is accepted without challenge, presumably for fear of promising a change that at this juncture could not realistically be delivered. Within the early church, therefore, it was not beyond the realms of possibility to have present within a single fellowship both master and slave, and so verse 18 contains a caution that the Christian slave ought not to take advantage of the Christian master by withholding duty and obligation in the performance of his or her usual tasks.

However, it also enjoins the Christian slave to endure in the case of a harsh and overbearing master, and to continue to give of his or her best, for 'it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God' (verse 19). To be punished for our own wrongs is to be expected, the writer of the epistle maintains, but the greater credit belongs to those who



commit no wrong and persist in doing good, and who bear their punishment with patience. The Christian slave ought in all circumstances to perform his or her duties as work offered to Jesus Christ (cf Colossians 3: 17 and 1 Corinthians 10: 31), and in instances where harshness had to be endured, the example to turn to was Jesus himself as ‘the Suffering Servant’ in imitation of Isaiah 53 (verses 21-24). In the final verse of this section the writer urges the Christian slave bearing unfair treatment to trust ultimately in Jesus as the Shepherd and Guardian of their souls, and to find strength and comfort in his guidance and direction.

John 10: 1-10

This passage in one of the synoptic gospels would probably be described as a parable, and it is the case that the picture presented here of a caring and responsible shepherd finds echoes there too. The most striking example of the same would be the Parable of the Lost Sheep in Matthew 18: 10-14 and Luke 15: 1-7, and further examples of the shepherd motif can be found at Matthew 26: 31 and Mark 14: 27, when Jesus predicts Peter’s denial by quoting from Zechariah 13: 7 - ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’

In the opening verses here a contrast is made between ‘the Good Shepherd (as in 10: 11) and ‘the thieves and bandits’ who are Israel’s leaders, condemned by the prophets as false and insincere (cf Jeremiah 50: 6 and Isaiah 56: 11). The prophet’s promise of God at Ezekiel 34: 15 - ‘I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down’ - finds echo in verse 3 and the recognition by the sheep of the shepherd’s voice and their obedience in following him ‘because they know his voice’, without any necessity on his part to drive them ahead of him, offering a further contrast between a known and trusted figure and ‘a stranger’.

‘I am the gate for the sheep’ (v 7) describes Jesus as both the door and the one who has the right to enter through the door. Further, the sheep pen on a hillside usually was a primitive enclosure for the sheep, with generally only a single entrance to it, and the shepherd would lay his body across it, to keep the sheep in and to keep the wolves out. The shepherd, therefore, would put his body on the line, and whereas ‘the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy’, Jesus as the Good Shepherd promotes life and offers it in abundance.



Sermon ideas

(a) In the verses from the Acts of the Apostles we have a description of the church that is worth copying, a model of the church that is applicable to all ages and generations, a portrait of the church that brings out many of its most important characteristics.

It was, firstly, a LEARNING CHURCH. The Apostle Paul spoke of the unsearchable riches of Christ. In other words, we could spend a lifetime or more trying to fathom or understand the love of God in Jesus Christ and it would make no difference, at no point would we be able to say that the wonder of it all was exhausted. A favourite motif for the Christian life is to regard it as a pilgrimage or a journey. Every day, therefore, is an opportunity to find out some new thing about God, to develop our relationship with him daily and to see him more clearly, to love him more dearly and to follow him more nearly. Secondly, it was a SHARING CHURCH. In the early church a common occurrence was the Love Feast or Agape. Everybody brought something, as they were able to afford it, and then everything was pooled and shared out to all who were present, rich and poor alike. In the spirit of Jesus Christ we shall not be entirely happy if we see someone in need and neglect the opportunity to lend some appropriate help and assistance. Thirdly, the Christians at Jerusalem met to BREAK BREAD TOGETHER. The picture that emerges is of a church that is a real fellowship, whereas so often in the history of the church there is to be found many a story of how argument and quarrel arose, and of how disputation and contentiousness split it apart. Finally, it was a PRAYING AND WORSHIPPING CHURCH. They persevered in prayer and on a daily basis they attended the Temple together. In other words, they never forgot to worship, they never forgot to go to church. In attendance they declared their loyalty to Jesus Christ and they enhanced the experience of worship for all by joining themselves to others to form a great company.

(b) Psalm 23 lends itself to a reflection on 'THE MEANS OF GRACE', which includes worship, prayer, the Bible, the sacraments, a sphere of service, and the fellowship of a worshipping congregation.

Firstly, the grace of God is magnificently described in the first two verses: 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.'

Secondly, though, we are presented with a further picture of God's graciousness in the description of him as host in verse 5: 'You prepare a table before me in presence of my enemies. You anoint



my head with oil; my cup overflows.’ Remarkably, this plenty is supplied in the ‘presence of my enemies’, which can be explored further as from within, representing our fears, anxieties, prejudices, intolerance, etc. Do we permit the grace of God to heal from within; or do we always look for scapegoats or for someone else to blame?

Thirdly, there is scope to explore too the final triumph of God’s grace in reflecting further on the fulfilment and satisfaction that lies at the heart of the closing verse: ‘Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

(c) The First Peter reading can be developed further along the lines of addressing THE PROBLEM OF PAIN, set within the context of its inevitability in some form or another. (i) Pain is unavoidable and we all suffer sooner or later. (ii) Some pain we may foolishly be responsible for ourselves, choosing wrongly or inappropriately, but on other occasions there is neither rhyme nor reason to it. (iii) In such circumstances we may endure it by recalling to mind the undeserved suffering of Jesus Christ and taking our example from him. (iv) Finally, whatever the nature of the pain that is borne, further reflection on God’s transformation of it - ‘by his wounds you have been healed’ (verse 24b) - may suggest that in suffering and sacrifice a deeper awareness of God’s love and mercy is achieved or some further blessing bestowed upon others.

(d) If you choose to major on the Gospel reading you may select as the governing text Jesus’ words ‘I am the gate of the sheep’ and seek to develop that further by highlighting the twin elements of PROTECTION and PASTURE. The good shepherd will lay across the entrance to the sheep-fold and bar entry to ‘thieves and robbers’, thus keeping the flock safe from harm or inauthentic leadership; and, moreover, he will lead the sheep out from it to find sustenance beyond and life in all its fullness, rather than be trapped within in fearfulness or isolation. There is scope too for reflecting on the idea of A GATE-KEEPER, who may in self-appointed ways bar entry to ‘outsiders’ or keep dependent those within who crave something further than the enclosed space of the sheep-fold. There is potential as well for relating the Gospel passage to the 23rd Psalm and the observations above on ‘the means of grace’ as a liberating and freeing set of resources to encourage discipleship and growth in faith and understanding.



Time with Children

With a stop watch invite the children to time how long it takes to complete a simple activity, such as passing a ball from hand to hand the length of a church pew. Repeat and take note of the best time.

Note that everything nowadays is getting faster and faster, speeding up the whole time, and contrast this with the picture of leisure and tranquillity presented in the Bible verses which speak of 'green pastures' and 'quiet waters' (Psalm 23: 1,2). Cars and aeroplanes are faster than before; almost any game or sport is played at a faster pace nowadays; computers are bigger and faster too; and we are familiar with 'fast food', served on the table in the quickest time possible.

You may wish to highlight that with people rushing to and fro, the pace of life is getting faster and faster. In fact, so busy are we, we are in danger of not having enough time for one another. We have got to be doing things, or we have got to be somewhere else. And we are in danger too of not having enough time for God, of neglecting him and not giving him proper time and attention. Sunday, though, is the Lord's Day, a special time in the week that is set apart from all others so that we might think of God and give thanks for all that he has done for us in Jesus Christ. 'This is the day that the Lord has made, Let us rejoice and be glad in it!' (Psalm 118: 24).

Prayers

A Prayer of Approach:

Almighty and everlasting God, we worship you with heart and mind and soul;

and with all your people everywhere,

the flock of your pasture,

we praise you this day for your leading and directing.

We are very different from one another:

Some of us are small and others large;

our backgrounds and interests are not the same,

hence the variety in our midst;

some have plenty and others little by comparison;

and some are buoyant today and others flat and fearful.



Yet you have made us so as to depend upon each other in the fellowship of the church,
and so as to be united in acknowledging your love and care.

We approach you with awe and ascribe to you all honour and glory and majesty and praise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

A Prayer of Confession:

Merciful God, we confess to you that we have sinned and wandered far away.

We confess the sins that no one knows and the sins that everyone knows;
the sins that shame and condemn us

and the sins we practise time and again with ease and which disturb us less and less.

We confess our sins as a church:

We have not loved one another as Christ has loved us;

we have not forgiven one another as we have been forgiven;

we have not given ourselves in love and service for the world as Christ gave himself for us.

Grant us a true repentance, and forgive us all our mistakes and shortcomings,

and bestow upon us the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit to enable us to amend our lives

and to live at peace with you and with another;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

A Prayer of Petition:

O God, keep us alert to the sound of your voice, known and respected,

that we may follow you with confidence and in hope.

Help us to be life-affirming in thought and word and deed,

and give us understanding and sympathy;

guard us against selfishness, that we may enter into the joys and sufferings of others;

and use us to gladden and strengthen those who are weak and in need of support,

so that in us may be reflected the authentic light of life;

through Jesus Christ our Lord, with the Father, and the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for evermore. Amen.



A Prayer of Thanksgiving and Dedication:

O Lord our God, we give you thanks that you are our God,
and we are the people of your pasture, and the sheep of your hand.

Bring us to green pastures and lead us beside the still waters,
that in your presence we may find refreshment,
and our hearts may be at rest;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Generous God, we bring you these gifts because we know that our life and all human life
rightfully belongs to you and that everything we have we hold in trust from you.

We praise you for everything you have done for humankind in Jesus Christ.

Help us, therefore, to make our own offering complete by living in obedience to you;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

A Prayer of Intercession and Commemoration:

O God, whose Son our Lord Jesus Christ once described himself as the door of the sheep,
the gateway to a fuller and richer experience:

Have mercy on all who are afflicted by doubt or perplexity amid the mysteries of life;
and enable them to know the comforting presence of Christ,
that they may learn to walk humbly by faith in him
and find rest and repose in every circumstance still to come.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT BE IN WANT.

Sovereign God, we pray for the leaders of the nations,
that building on the foundations of justice and truth and freedom,
they may unite people everywhere in harmony and peace and mutual respect,
that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT BE IN WANT.

God of all the realm,
direct the minds of those we have elected to serve in the Parliaments
at Holyrood and Westminster, and in Brussels and Strasbourg,
that they may exercise their responsibilities in such a way as
to consider all things wisely and thoughtfully,
and for the sake of the welfare of the people;



and grant them understanding hearts,
and sound judgements, and a concern always for the common good and the benefit of all.
THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT BE IN WANT.

God of all the earth,
we have found out so much knowledge and yet possess so little wisdom,
and so we pray that in your mercy you may save us from ourselves.
Help us to learn the right use of nature no less quickly than we unlock and discover its treasures; and give us
hearts and wills made new in Jesus Christ
and to dedicate our gifts of knowledge to the service of others and to your glory.
THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT BE IN WANT.

Consoling God, comfort of the sorrowful and strength of the weary:
May the prayers of all that call upon you in any difficulty capture your attention,
that they may know your mercy has been with them to bear them up and support them
even in the midst of their trouble.
THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT BE IN WANT.

God of all, near and far,
and whose love recognises no barriers of nation or race or colour,
we ask your blessing on the Church in all the world;
that through the witness of its faith, its worship and its life,
your way may be known upon the earth and your saving power among all the nations.
THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT BE IN WANT.

We give you thanks, O God, for all who have followed Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd,
and we commit ourselves and those we love to your care this day,
praying that you will guard us from every danger and guide us in the right way,
until we enter into the fullness of your presence;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to say: 'Our Father.....'



Musical suggestions

CH4 396	'And can it be, that I should gain'
CH4 436	'Christ triumphant, ever reigning'
CH4 255	'Father, hear the prayer we offer'
CH4 706	'For the healing of the nations'
CH4 153	'Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father'
CH4 461	'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds'
CH4 462	'The King of Love my Shepherd is'
CH4 14	'The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want' (Psalm 23)
CH4 63	'All people that on earth do dwell' (Psalm 100)
CH4 522	'The Church is wherever God's people are praising'
CH4 355	'You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd'
CH4 272	'Father of peace, and God of love!'
CH4 194	'This is the day'
CH4 189	'Be still'



Additional Resources

Pray Now is designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. *Word of Life* will be launched at this year's [Heart and Soul](#) event and is available for pre-order from [St Andrew Press](#).



SPIRITUALITY OF CONFLICT

The [Spirituality of Conflict](#) website publishes reflections on the Sunday gospel readings in the 3-year lectionary cycle of the church. The reflections explore the themes of conflict within the gospels and offer questions and commentary for private reading, group discussions and public worship. Whilst most of the content will be connected to the Revised Common Lectionary, some will relate to occasions throughout the year – everything from St Patrick's Day to World AIDS Day. All of the content is free to download, use and share with others.

[Quick Guides](#) are designed to help people with the various elements of leading worship, gathering community and ordering space.

Quick Guide...

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday archive material and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#).

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Alexander Millar for providing us with this material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

